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1

THE BRIDGE SLIPS from my grasp. I peer down at the river. It's yawning in the night, far below me, and I'm falling towards it like a wingless bird. Dead in my body, dead in my heart. Ready to die again.

Only I can't.

A weightless moment, an ecstasy of fear, then the vice closes round me, hooks my chest, jerks me upwards. Something hard slams into my back. The metal rails at the top of the bridge. My feet slither back on the ledge, skid off again.

The vice tightens, hauls me back against the top of the bridge. I hang there, whimpering, kicking my legs. Ruby's voice blares down at me.

'Chicken bastard!'

She's got me from behind. Must have reached through the rails just as I let go of 'em. Got both her arms under mine and they're locked round my chest. And now she's yanking me back towards the ledge.

'Chicken waster,' she mutters, 'chicken bloody—'

'Ruby—'

'Think killing yourself's going to sort everything?'

'Ruby—'

'Going to pay your debt to my daughter?'

'Ruby—'

'Well, it ain't! Cos jumping off a bridge don't pay no debt to Becky! Don't pay no debt to nobody!'

'Ruby!' I splutter. 'Ruby!'

She takes no notice, just goes on hauling me up.

'Let me go!' I scream.

'Don't tempt me.'

'I'm a piece of shit!'

'Yeah, like I don't know that.'

I kick my legs again, try to wriggle free. I don't want to live, Bigeyes. I don't deserve to. Becky died in the river. And she died cos of me. So I got to die there too. No question. I got to die there too.

I stare down at Mother Grime. Her black watery mouth's still open, waiting for me. I wriggle again, thrash about. Makes no difference. Ruby only tightens her grip, goes on pulling. I feel my feet clock back on the ledge. Ruby crabs her arms round my stomach, snags me hard against the rails.

I feel my hands close round the metal. Like they want to.

Even if I don't.

I shut my eyes. No sounds from the bridge. No voices, no traffic. Just me and Ruby breathing hard, the river whispering below. Then Ruby's voice again, still raging.

'Think killing yourself's going to put you right, huh?'

I don't answer.

'Huh?' she snaps.

I open my eyes, stare down again. Mother Grime goes on flowing. I think of Becky's body, swallowed by water. How the grinks in the van shot her all those years ago, heaved her off the bridge to disappear for ever.

How it was my fault. Cos they were my enemies, Bigeyes, not hers. But she died and I lived. It's not right. Becky was my friend. My best friend ever. I should be with her, right now. Whatever her mum says.

Ruby tightens her grip, like she's picked up my thought.

'Still want to jump, right?' she fumes.

I say nothing. She leans her head close to the rails.

'Yeah, you do. You want to jump. You know why? Cos you're a coward. A slimy little coward. You think jumping off wipes your slate clean. Well, it don't. It's just the chicken way out. But I guess that's cool with you. The chicken way out. Cos it don't take no guts, huh? No responsibility, no—'

'Ruby—'

'Go and jump!' she bellows. 'If that's all you got. Cos I'm telling you—if that's the best you got for Becky, then you ain't worth piss. You want to top yourself? Go ahead!'

She lets go, slips her arms free.

'Or do something better. Your call.'

Sound of footsteps on the bridge. Ruby tramping away, heading for the north side. I watch her for a moment

through the rails. She doesn't look back, not once. I want her to. But I know she won't. She'll just go on walking.

If I jump, she won't even notice.

I stare down at the river again.

'Mother Grime,' I murmur. 'You bitch.'

Look back at Ruby. She's disappeared from view, but she'll still be walking.

Still not looking.

'Bitch,' I murmur after her. 'Yeah, Ruby, you too.'

I climb back over the rail, drop down onto the bridge. Ruby's close to the north side now, trigging steadily on. I start to walk after her. Don't ask me why, Bigeyes, cos I don't know. She's the last person in the world I want right now.

And I'm the last person she wants.

But I keep walking, walking, walking.

Then I catch it. The sound of the motor. Coming from the south side. Doesn't sound like a problem. Shouldn't even be worried about it. Middle of the night, quiet time, but there's been other traffic, a bit anyway. This could be anyone.

Only it's not, Bigeyes. It's not anyone. It's trouble.

Don't ask me how I know.

I don't even need to look round. But I do. And it's what I thought. A van chunking over the bridge towards me, towards Ruby. Just like it did the day Becky got shot. And now here's her mum in just the same danger.

And once again—cos of me.

I scream at Ruby.

'Run for it! Run for it!'

I race down towards her. She's not running but she's turned and she's watching me hare across the bridge.

'Ruby! Run!'

She's still not running. She's stopped and she's just watching me. What's wrong with her? She must have seen the van steaming up behind me. There'll be grinks in it, just like there were with Becky. It's all happening again, like it did three years ago.

Sound of a shot.

Misses me, misses Ruby, but now she starts running, only—Jesus!—she's cutting the wrong way. Meant to be blasting off the north side but she's belting straight at me.

'Ruby, go back! Head for the alleyways! Other side of the main road!'

Engine's getting louder. Glance round. Van's close to the middle of the bridge now. Three gobbos in the front, one leaning out the window. Another shot.

Misses again.

I stumble on and here's Ruby bustling up.

'Ruby, for Christ's sake—'

She doesn't answer, just grabs my hand, pulls me over to the other side of the bridge. Van swerves across the road towards us. I'm praying for something else to slum up. Car, bus, taxi, whatever. But still nothing.

Van skews to a halt. Two of the gobbos pile out.

Ruby's still pulling me towards the edge of the bridge, and now I see where she's heading. The steps down to the wharf.

'Not down there, Ruby.'

She takes no notice, just goes on pulling.

'Ruby!'

She tugs me harder.

'OK, OK,' I mutter. 'I got what you want.'

She lets go and we pile down the steps. Feet pound behind us on the bridge.

This is a dronky idea, Bigeyes. I should never have let Ruby jam us down here. We'll never get away. The grinks are too fast, too strong, and they'll block the way back. And they got guns.

Shit!

First I get Becky killed, now it's going to be her mum. And Ruby was only trying to clip me clear of these grinks. I got to do my best for her. For Becky's sake too. Sound of feet above us.

Thump, thump, thump.

They're taking the steps in twos and threes. We got a lead but not much.

'Faster,' says Ruby.



2

BOTTOM OF THE steps and here's the wharf. Dimpy place to hide. We're separated from the bank by a small channel, got nothing to the left and just a short quay to the right with a few slaggy river boats and a big old motor cruiser at the end. No lights on any of 'em.

But we're not here to hide. I worked out Ruby's plan on the way down. She thought the alleyways up top are too far to get to, since the gobbos have got guns. So she's led 'em down here and now we got to belt back to the street, taking the steps up the other side of the bridge.

And lose the bastards on the way.

There's just a chance it might work. Both the gobbos are on this set of steps. I can tell from the sound of 'em. We might just be able to wig it up the others. I start to cut right but Ruby catches my arm.

Jesus, Bigeyes. Now what?

She's staring at the boats, and now she's pulling me off to the left. I glare at her. Heavy breaths above us, feet getting louder. Ruby glares back, pulls me harder, and now I get it. She's not heading for the other steps. She's slipping us round the back of these ones.

Another crap idea. Even worse than coming down in the first place. But we got no time to do anything else now. The grinks are almost down. I let her pull me round the base of the steps. She draws me in close to her, arm over my shoulder. I feel her breathing hard, her body warm against me.

Not acting like she's scared.

I'm telling you, Bigeyes, she's something, this woman. Might have made a dimpy choice coming down here but she's something. No wonder Becky had so much bottle. She got it from her mum.

Thump, thump.

Silence.

The grinks have hit the wharf. Only they're not moving. They're standing there, just hidden, other side of the steps. I glance at Ruby. She's pulled out her mobile.

Got one arm holding me close, and we're crouching in the darkness with those two grinks still standing there on the other side of the steps, and with her other hand she's texting.

Catches my eye, looks down again, goes on texting, sparks off a message, slips the mobile back in her pocket. Cool as a breeze. Not like me. I'm starting to breathe blood.

I can feel it pounding in my head. I got my hands moving inside my coat and they're squeezing the knives, just like they used to. Only it's not the same, not now. Cos I don't love the blades any more. I hate 'em. But it makes no difference.

My hands still find 'em.

Hold 'em tight. They're ready. Won't do much good probably. Least one of these grinks has got a gun. Maybe both of 'em. Maybe all three. But they haven't found us yet so we still got surprise on our side.

And that means a chance.

Ruby looks at me sharp. I try to read her face in the darkness. It's saying something, something I can't make out. And then I catch it. Something I recognize from the past. Cos it's something Becky used to have in her face.

The word no.

In her face, in her eyes.

No.

That's all.

No to what? Don't play thick, Bigeyes. No to everything. That's what it meant. Everything that's wrong, she meant. And there was plenty wrong back then. You bet there was. Right now it's the knives that's wrong.

Yeah, even here, with grinks ready to wipe us out, Ruby's felt my hands move inside my coat and she's guessed what they got, and her face is saying that word again, throwing it at me through the darkness.

No.

I feel my fingers ease.

Just a bit.

Sound of movement, other side of the steps. Slow, slow. They're not moving away. They're checking round and they're taking their time. They know we're still down here. They'd have rushed up the other steps by now if they thought we'd blasted out that way.

So much for Ruby's plan.

They'll check everywhere, including here.

And they're not stupid. One of 'em'll keep close to the steps. See what I mean? Shadow moving over to the right. Ruby's clapped it too. Pulls me closer to her, crouching even lower. Shadow hasn't turned, hasn't seen us yet. It's wandering down the wharf, stopping by each of the river boats, peering down.

And the other grink?

You guessed it. Bastard's still standing at the bottom of the steps. There's no way he's going to let us back up again. Easy piss. He stands here, guards these steps, keeps an eye on the other ones at the same time. Second gobbo goes looking.

Third gobbo up on the bridge checks down too. I'm guessing he can't see too good from up there, what with the bridge in the way, so we may just stay cute from him, but he's another problem we got to smack.

Shadow's stopped. Halfway down the wharf. Fixing one of the river boats. It's rocking in the swell. Sound of a cough from his mate. Still standing close to the bottom of the steps, just the other side of the brick. Check out the shadow again.

It's moving. Guy's clambering aboard the boat. Disappears from view round the back of the cabin. Only now Ruby's shifting too. Got a hand over my mouth.

Yeah, right. Like I'm going to suddenly blab a noise. Like I haven't spent my whole life ducking slime. I shake my head, scowl at her. She takes her hand away, grips my arm, edges me towards the side of the wharf.

Christ, no.

Effing water, just below us. I feel the old fear flick over me. Can't stop it. Ruby takes no notice. Maybe she doesn't realize, just thinks I'm freaking about the gobbos. Well, I am. I know what they can do, more than she does, maybe, but it's the water that's choking my head.

She's stopped again, still holding my arm, and now she's checking behind. I don't need to. I've checked already. First gobbo's still hidden behind the steps, other one's still on the boat. But we've moved out of the darkness and we're right at the edge of the wharf.

Moment the guy on the boat climbs back to the quay, he'll see us crouching here. I grab Ruby, try to push her back towards the steps. But she won't go. And now she's forcing me even closer to the water. Then I see it.

The ladder down the side of the wharf.

Into the river.